

I'm My Own Grandma

The Past and Present Lives of Justine Frank

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The portrait of Justine Frank we have drawn here is strongly colored, and its most basic contour lines are clear. The setting is rich and familiar, and we even have a pathway—Frank's paintings and her own words—to follow straight into the artist's innermost thoughts (supposedly). And yet the most that scholarly research can reveal about Frank is that we can learn nothing more about her. Observation of Frank's life and death is blindness, study is ignorance, and memory is forgetting.¹

These words conclude Roee Rosen's biography of Justine Frank. The present exhibition—the first retrospective of the Jewish-Belgian Surrealist, held over half a century after her death—is an opportunity to shed off some of the frustration reflected in Rosen's failed effort to “observe” and “study” the artist. True: each question raised concerning Frank yields a few of contradictory answers, whether one queries her private life or her ethics and aesthetics. Because Frank was situated within several crucial junctures of Twentieth century culture, it appears we may learn a great deal from her life and work, yet at each such juncture she seemed to have done her best to antagonize, confuse and even repel those around her (and she seems to intimidate and confuse even today). Frank was a Surrealist at the movement's most innovative and radical phase, yet she focused her art on a concoction of explicit erotic imagery and Jewish iconography disagreeable to most Surrealists. She highlighted her Jewish identity on the event of European Jewry's worst horrors and near-annihilation, yet she seemed intent to depict Judaism by intentionally employing imagery culled from the entire genealogy of Western Anti-Semitism; she derided Zionism, but immigrated to Tel Aviv. Ambivalence is Frank's second nature—but maybe this contrary stance can also be experienced as one of multiplicity, imagination and humor, not necessarily leading to “blindness,” “ignorance” and “forgetting,” as Rosen asserts. Perhaps today this condition of plurality and unresolved inner-tension can be experienced with a gay sense of relief, as a form of liberation.

¹ Roee Rosen, “A Stained Portfolio: On Justine Frank's Life and Work,” in: Rosen and Justine Frank, *Sweet Sweat* (Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2009), p. 79

Even if Frank were remembered, at the end of the day, as a mere curiosity, the last few years have witnessed a substantial awakening of interest in her work, after decades of neglect, if not outright repression. In 1993 Anne Kastorp published her seminal essay on the artist.² Kastorp claimed Frank's plethora of self-portraits in disguise and her feminine eroticism articulate both a radical feminist stance, well ahead of its time, and a parodic debacle of André Breton's Surrealist percepts from within. In 2000 a first interdisciplinary academic conference on Frank's work was held in Venice. Twenty drawings by Frank are missing from the present exhibition since they are currently on display in another exhibition, alongside *Cadeau* (1921), Man Ray's famous nail-studded iron—the first reunion of Frank with Surrealist art since the late Twenties.³ Finally, the first Publication in Hebrew of Frank's pornographic novel, *Sweet Sweat* (which I had the rewarding pleasure of translating), was appended by Rosen's detailed biography (detailed—that is—considering the want of information on Frank). This relative abundance enabled the retrospective catalogue to be free of excessive verbal baggage: my introductory comments briefly summarize the artist's history, and Roe Rosen had written annotations where it seemed necessary. Despite my disagreements with Rosen, I do think his book complements this catalogue and provides further keys to those who seek them.

1. Justine Frank in Paris, 1924-1934

Little is known about Justine Frank's early years, but we can safely assume, judging by her limited, broken Yiddish, and by the art classes she must have taken, that her family was secular, perhaps assimilated, and that they lead a fairly comfortable life in Antwerp. Rosen's chapter on that period is, for the most part, a patchwork of speculations, but he was able to establish that someone in Belgium, most likely a relative, supported the artist financially until 1936 (Justine Frank did not work for a living until the day she died—and, like Marcel Duchamp, was rather proud of that).

Once in Paris, Frank soon mingled with members the Surrealist movement. Although she was warmly welcomed, she kept her own artistic production secret for a number of years. This secrecy appears to have been the result of neither insecurity nor modesty, but rather an informed intuition

² Anne Kastorp, "Repulsive Beauty, Justine Frank's Eroticism as a Feminist Proto-Deconstruction of André Breton's Surrealist Tropes," *Sign & Seal, The Brown College Journal of Critical Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (East Orange, NJ, 1993), pp. 254-278.

³ See: Antonio Somaini, editor, *Il Dono, The Gift* (Milan, Charta, 2001)

that her work would not be well received. From the very beginning Frank's paintings revealed in a disturbing and hallucinatory juxtaposition of erotic motifs and Jewish tropes. While the Surrealists advocated a radical investigation of matters sexual and championed the transgressive sexuality of the Marquis de Sade, the place allotted women artists in this enterprise was, as a number of scholars have pointed out, rather scarce, and the desires celebrated were, primarily, those of men.⁴ The Jewish motifs in Frank's paintings were an anomaly as well. While a provocative, sacrilegious assault on Catholicism was a staple of Surrealism, Jewish Surrealists (such as Man Ray) abstained from addressing this facet of their heritage and identity in their art—and Frank's spectacle of Judaism was far too baffling to be understood as merely satirical (nor is it clear in her art—and this is crucial—whether she asserts her “Judaism” from within a traditional Jewish perception, as an empowered, self-willed and individualistic stance, or as a cultural construct devised, for the most part, by European, Christian culture). The merging of these two realms—Judaism and sexuality—simply has no parallel in the period's cultural scene. Furthermore—Frank is a laughing artist, and her laughter is, at times, rather offensive; often her work seems to travesty not only her own person and preconceived notion of desire and religion, but also the Surrealists themselves.

And so, it was not until 1928 that Frank exposed her work to the public. And while at first her work was received positively, further reactions were to swiftly chill, until the outright anger stirred by her ‘Fantomas’ paintings of 1930. These would turn out to be the last paintings Frank would have the privilege of exhibiting during her lifetime. In twenty-seven years of laborious and ambitious art production the window of opportunity opened for less than a couple of years. A hint at her despair and aggravation was given when Frank dubbed her studio, years later, “a painting cemetery.”⁵

During that period, Frank's association with the controversial author George Bataille had grown more intimate. Bataille's influence on Frank is clearly evident in *Sweet Sweat* (1931), her pornographic novel published under the pseudonym ‘Grégoire Coque’ (two years after Bataille had

⁴ André Breton's famous novel, *Nadja*, demonstrates the model of fantasized woman favored by the Surrealist: woman as an erotic muse on the verge of madness, whose convulsive beauty is explicitly linked to fits of hysteria (celebrated by the Breton and his colleagues, at one point, as “the greatest invention of the Nineteenth century.” Art such as Frank's, rendering woman's own desires as excessive and often objectifying and sexually violating men, was, indeed, far-removed from that model. For the place of women in Surrealism see, for example: Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg, editors, *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 1991)

⁵ Rosen, *Sweet Sweat*, p. 40.

published his famous erotic novel *Story of the Eye*). The narrative opens when a powerful libertine, Urdukas, kidnaps Rachel, a young Jewish woman, intending to rape and kill her. He is dissuaded, however, by the sweet aroma of her sweat, a smell he whiffs in as an epiphany of sorts. He realizes the girl is a prodigy, with a special gift for the carnal and criminal arts, and that his vocation is to become her tutor. The voracious feminine apprentice does surpass her teacher, who gradually subjects himself to her whims and fancies, culminating with the last and most horrific—parricide.

Despite many pornographic conventions in the vein of Sade and his followers, *Sweet Sweat* is an exceptional piece of obscene literature in three ways: First, as in her paintings, Judaism is center-stage; Second, the narrative is propelled by the magical powers attributed to its feminine characters, and particularly to the astounding woman called *the Animist* (who is capable, among other things, of breathing life into inanimate objects which then actively partake in her orgies); third, Frank's descriptions of desire and libertinage are characterized by a burlesque humor that gives the book an air quite unlike that of its precursors and contemporaries.

Sweet Sweat's publication constituted an open declaration of alliance with Bataille's camp—and the timing could not have been worse. Breton, the “pope” of Surrealism, shared many fields of interest with Bataille, but the manner in which the latter pursued the crossroad of spirituality, sexuality, abjection and violence alarmed Breton and prompted a reaction extreme even by the high standards for power struggles he had set. In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* Breton judges Bataille to be no less than a spiritual hazard.⁶ The veritable war between Bataille and Breton intensified the alienation and loneliness Frank was experiencing. To top it all, her relations with Bataille were to end soon after. Although it cannot be said with certainty that their friendship was of a romantic nature (and, in fact, there is no certainty in general regarding Frank's sexual preferences), it seems certain that Bataille's love affair with the poet Laure played a role in their breakup. In 1934, Frank emigrated to Palestine.

2. Justine Frank in Tel Aviv, 1934-1943

⁶ André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," *Manifestos of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan, The University Press, and Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1972 [1932].), pp. 180-186

While it would be an understatement to say that Tel Aviv in the Thirties was an unsuitable place for someone like Frank, she was driven there by several reasons, first and foremost being the pleas of her best—most likely, her only—friend, Fanja Hissin (mother of Tamar Biniamini, then three years old). Hissin, a kiosk owner widowed a year earlier, met Frank on December 4th, 1930, in Paris, after a screening of Salvador Dalí and Luis Bunuel's *L'Age d'or*, and the two women took immediately to each other. Besides her longing for Hissin, Frank was burdened by increasing social, professional and existential hardships in Paris, and the ominous rise of European Anti-Semitism must have played a role in her decision as well. Frank's work reveals that the artist made persistent and methodical use of the means by which the image of the Jew was constituted in Europe—beginning with medieval theology and art, continuing with Elizabethan literature, Nineteenth and early Twentieth century psychiatry and racial sciences, and concluding with contemporary anti-Semitic texts and illustrations. Even as the meaning of her appropriations of Jewish tropes is debatable, there is no doubt that she was acutely aware of the genealogy of European anti-Semitic perceptions, and of the monsters they threatened to breed.

And despite all that—opting for Tel Aviv (and not, for example, New York) was odd—if not tragic. Frank had always disavowed nationalist ideologies; once in Tel Aviv, her attitude became one of manifested, outspoken hostility towards the values of the Zionist society. Frank persisted with her disagreeable artistic amalgamation of erotica and Judaism in the context of a puritan culture, hostile to figures of the Jewish diaspora of the kind she rendered; the attempt at the time was, in fact, to assert a new indigenous identity, virile and healthy, that would stand in opposition to the figure of the diasporic Jew, perceived as effeminate, degenerate and doomed. Furthermore, Frank denigrated Hebrew in several paintings, and adamantly refused to speak the language in daily life—all this at a time when speaking Hebrew was a veritable decree in Jewish Palestine (a musical review by an immensely popular woman singer, for instance, was banned because several of the traditional Jewish songs it featured were not in Hebrew). The revival of the language of the bible was not only perceived as a powerful vehicle of the Zionist enterprise but as part of its very foundation. If Fanja Hissin was hoping that Frank's attitude towards her new community would soften with time she was disillusioned: the artist's condition worsened both because of her own destructive patterns and because of the vindictive responses she received.

Frank was living virtually as an untouchable. But the social banishment did not prevent an unremitting buzz of ill-willed gossip around her. Some of these rumors were patently false. Frank's chronic intestinal disease became, according to hearsay, a mortal venereal disease. Frank's tendency to dress in loose cotton gowns, and the fact that she seldom combed her hair and did not shave her armpits and legs was perceived as evidence of wanton eccentricity, verging on madness. But as the years went by and her financial, physical and mental condition deteriorated further, her behavior did indeed become more disconcerting. Frank had suffered hardships from the first day she arrived in Palestine, but after she had to evacuate her squalid apartment in the Southern outskirts of Tel Aviv and was forced live in a windowless basement in the same building. Her situation became unbearable once her financial support was discontinued. Furthermore, when World War II was looming, Frank was convinced—according to Tamar Biniamini—that the Nazis would soon conquer the world. She thus reacted to the air bombardments the city endured with relative stoicism, despite the victims they claimed: they appeared as an insignificant prelude to the horrors to come.

In the late Thirties complaints abounded that Frank was stalking and harassing artists, poets and even one gallerist in Tel Aviv. Her behavior followed regular patterns: Frank would position herself embarrassingly close to her victim, mime his gestures or disrupt his socializing at a café with vocal queries and denigrating comments on his latest work. This behavior initially prompted reactions of mere contempt and dismissal, embarrassment and derision. But in 1940 a dramatic shift occurred in the ostracized artist's manners, a shift that would lead to the worst and final crisis of her life. She began to persistently pester Marcel Janco, the venerated artist and recent immigrant.

Pop-psychology aside, it is easy to figure some of the reasons for Frank's fixation on Janco. Like her, he was a veteran of a major Avant-Garde movement—Dada—and began a new life in Tel Aviv. But while Frank never won real recognition amongst the Surrealists, Janco was accepted as a significant member of Dada, and while Frank zealously stuck to her provocative artistic syntax, and paid a heavy toll for her relentlessness, Janco was quick to adjust his art to its new context, and was soon conferred with honor and stature. Janco's ability to put his art at the service of the local Zionist agenda combined with his agreeable late style, were deplored by Frank as an outright betrayal of the individualist, agitating and transgressive heritage of the Avant-Garde.

On April 22nd, 1942, Frank arrived as an uninvited, and unwelcome, guest, at the festive opening of an exhibition entitled, rather ambitiously, *Desert Light and Light Unto the Nations*, held at the *Ohel Shem* theater hall in Tel Aviv. According to most accounts, Frank entered the space long after speeches and salutes were done with, and most guests and some of the artists had already left. She stormed to the center of the lobby, tore off her dress and—stark naked and shouting slurs—proceeded to run towards Janco and attempted to pound him with her fists. Several men restrained her, and someone rushed to call the police. Frank was forcefully evacuated and arrested. Frank herself later told Hissin quite a different story: although she did go to *Ohel Shem* intending to anger and provoke, all she did was shout a taunting sentence in Yiddish. The provocation worked all too well. A number of angry men (Janco was not among them, and seemed to have already left the place at the time), assaulted Frank, tore off her dress and beat her severely. Their intention, the artist claimed, was sexual. When the police arrived, she was unconscious.

Whatever truly happened at *Ohel Shem*, the event was followed by twenty-four hours of frightening incarceration, and had doubtlessly scarred Frank. After Fanja Hissin bailed her, she moved in with the widower. During the last year of her life she shared her friend's bedroom, the tiny chamber serving also as storage-space for her belongings, while Hissin's daughter, Tamar, slept in the living-room which was now also Frank's studio.

In the early afternoon hours of April 12th, 1943, Justine Frank left Hissin's apartment after asking for—and receiving—the cash her friend had handy. Tamar Biniamini was not present at the time. We shall never know whether Hissin tried to stop Frank and whether the artist disclosed her intentions. Justine Frank was never seen again.

3. The Contemporary Family Drama of Justine Frank

What are we to make of Frank today? We experience her comic shuffling of notions and tropes of masculinity and femininity in relation to several scenes of historic fathers: the fathers of French transgressive art and smut, the constituting fathers of Zionism, and the authoritative European fathers who forged compelling apparitions of 'the Jew.' In this sense, resurrecting Frank is not unlike deciding to adopt her as an alternative mother to these fathers, a mother whose art and life

shed light on what is absent and repressed in their scenes. The unease with which this essay began can be rephrased in familial terms as the troubling question, whether she is a good mother (providing a critique of Anti-Semitic perceptions by subversive appropriation, for example), or a bad mother (subjugating herself to the worst racist preconceptions out of sheer self hatred and destructiveness)? She is, in any case, a mother-witch, conjuring uncanny, obscene specters of the Jew.

The situation is, however, even more complicated. Frank is not only a mother, but also a daughter, and not only in terms of her demonstrated and willful infantilism. Frank is a daughter because the contemporary critic who adopts her as a mother simultaneously gives birth to Frank as his or her fantasized effigy—an offspring. It stands to reason that if this critic is a man, he is thus the father of his mother, and can whole-heartedly sing the old American song: “I’m my own grandpa”!

This may be a joke, but it underscores a principal point: When we approach Frank today as a good-bad mother we in fact tackle a problematic—if not monstrous—child, who is, in actuality, not the real Frank, but two distinct mother-daughters bred by the artist’s canonic scholars: Roe Rosen (who, in terms of interpretative stance, directly follows Anne Kastorp’s early stipulation, and should thus be considered, in this family drama, as her son), and (the later) Anne Kastorp.

Here are the two sinister specters of ‘the Jew’ these daughters summon: Kastorp’s fantasized Frank is the necromancer who conjures the Jew as a demonic mystic, whose Messianic program, aimed to transgress all laws, entails both incest and orgiastic feasts held at the synagogue during the holy fast of Atonement Day. And if we are swayed by the figure of Frank as comic, feminist and blasphemous, we are swept by a fantasy stemming from Kastorp’s early essay and further developed by Rosen. Then we witness the summoning of an even more demonic Jew of Anti-Semitism, the one who drank the blood of Christian children to cure his masculine menses in his theological incarnation, and remained pathologically feminine and degenerate in his time as a secular figure as well.⁷

⁷ For the belief that Jewish men suffered menses that could be cured by consuming Christian blood, see, for example: Sander Gilman, *The Case of Sigmund Freud, Medicine, and Identity at the Fin de Siecle* (Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 96-99.

It is therefore likely that Frank's ambivalence, which I earlier described as her "second nature," is indeed psychologically quite dramatic. However, the protagonist of this psychodrama is not Frank but rather Anne Kastorp, who first forged the figure of the forgotten Frank as a liberated and liberating artist, courageously pulling skeletons out of the encumbered closet of European culture, and then traded the resulting nightmare for another! Kastorp's two different Franks merged, somewhat later on, in Rosen's mind, and became a schizoid Frank, bifurcated from within. We can thus look at the painting *Frank's Guild* (1933; the year the Nazis came to power), wherein Frank depicts herself as a group, in four different disguises, over a table on which rests the miniature tombstone of Justine Frank, as a portrait of the artist as she is presently present: four fantasies on a theme of yore; four specters.

When I emphasize that when we attempt to see Frank we actually look at Kastorp's pair of Franks and Rosen's double Frank, do I make a familiar post modern claim by which there is no real Justine Frank beyond her mediated apparitions? Of Course not! Quite the opposite: I believe Justine Frank is as real as I am. This is of tremendous importance to the retrospective viewing of Frank's paintings—it is the very glance that can return to Frank some of the realness robbed by the good intentions of her interpreters.

Think, for example, of a substantially different kind of ambivalence, which does not exist in Rosen's and Kastorp's Franks—and stands in stark contradiction to these imagined Franks—but strongly and resolutely emerges from the paintings. Frank is considered an erotic, even pornographic artist, and an uncouth—to many, downright immoral—person. But despite the licentious aura, her compulsive production of self-portraiture (comparable, in that sense, to the work of Claude Cahun and Frida Kahlo), does not include even one exposure of *her own* body (and sexual organs are usually rendered in her work detached from a body, as part of a landscape, as a letter or a sign, as part of a fanciful coiffure). This apparent ambivalence towards real tactility and exposure can be compared to the attitude towards food in *Sweet Sweat*: while the author relishes every opportunity to describe food with seemingly gluttonous hyperbole, the dishes all share a repellent scatological quality (and Frank herself, it should be recalled, suffered from severe eating disorders). And here is another kind of ambivalence: within a seemingly narcissistic spectacle and torrent of sensual excess

a streak of self-disavowal and an ascetic renunciation is revealed!

Frank's paintings, in other words, refuse to abide by their ontological status as inanimate entities, whose forging ended when they were signed (and indeed—even the dates refuse to stand still, as the dating of Frank's work is debatable). This shattering of the divide between 'active' and 'passive' operates on the level of reception as well, as Frank seems to demand our response to her work to be both nurturing and nurtured. In terms of such active position, perhaps our questions should be rephrased: instead of "what are we to make of Frank today?" ask from here on, as you would before a day out with a good bad mother or a problematic child: "What shall we do with Frank today?" Frank, indeed, makes it abundantly clear that I'm my own grandma. The constitutive specters of my identity, summoned in her paintings, only strengthen her position as real.